

Newsletter for Birdwatchers

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Editorial

Bayas in Agram

On the evening of 26th June during a walk in the Agram Military Farm in Koramangala I noticed a few hanging baya nests on a Khajuri tree. The next morning at 7 AM I was delighted to find the weaver birds in action. There were 9 nests,

all on the eastern side of the tree. The birds obviously know the direction of the SW monsoon. It was an ideal nesting site. The palm leaves were all in place (not having been cut for human use) and the top of the tree looked like the head of a healthy woman with the hair flowing free in the wind.

There were 5 or 6 birds, all males with bright yellow turbans and black scarves. How these birds continue to sew while the nests sway violently in the wind is a subject for thought. I suppose they manage because they are themselves on the swaying object, the nest. A human darzee squatting on the floor would be incapable of sewing if the cloth on which he was working was struggling in the wind. I saw the birds making several trips to collect grass of which there were many varieties in the surroundings. I did not have my hearing aid, and I thought the birds were not singing their well known building song.

I suppose it is only in a large colony that the birds need to orchestrate their exertions by singing appropriate tunes. The impression I receive was of a somewhat lazy group, with no 'Mukkadam' around to hurry them on. On the night of 17th July we had the heaviest rain of the season. It was quite stormy with the K.E.B. power going off frequently. The morning of the 18th was clear, and I thought I might see the progress of the baya colony. The rain drenched Agram field had new life in it. The mating calls of bull-frogs were so loud that they rivalled the noise produced by a bulldozer. A plain warbler *Prinia subflava*, a redwattled lapwing, a couple of pied bush chats, a white-breasted kingfisher, a pair of brahmyni kites, and scores of mynas were enjoying the lovely weather. The bayas were at work at 8 a.m. Out of the dozen or so nests half were complete and the rest were 1/4 or 1/2 on the way to completion. None of the nests were damaged by rain or wind. We must learn from the birds how to build structures which can withstand inclement weather.

Protecting Banyans

Since Banyans provide such welcome shelter and food for birds, we must play our part in protecting them. The project of the Karnataka Heritage Society to identify, label, and protect the Banyan and Peepal trees of Bangalore is moving ahead, slowly but steadily. One of the problems of the banyan is that the aerial roots are prevented from reaching the ground and developing into a new tree by the many adverse influences, vandals, animals and passers by who delight in tugging at anything within reach and breaking it. To prevent this, some of the more well developed aerial roots should be encased in a split bamboo covering filled with earth. According to Mr Jayaram (Conservator of Forests, Urban) within a year the tree acquires a fresh stem and from here virtually a new tree is born. That is why Banyans live for ever if they are given a chance to do so. A demonstration was given by the Forest Department and the procedure is not difficult to implement.

Pending material

I see from the newspaper that 1 lakh cases are pending in the High Court, a case of justice delayed being justice

denied. I am afraid that the pending file of the Newsletter is in a similar state. Some articles, unused, are several years old. Making use of editorial privilege or license, and in the interests of clearing arrears I propose to make short abstracts from the old pieces highlighting only the more worthwhile information they contain. This seems to me to be the only practical solution. Hardly any point in keeping them pending any longer. If any contributor objects to being handled in this manner I will be grateful to be so advised. If the post was reasonably fast there could have been back & forth consultation between the Editor and the writer concerned; but this does not appear feasible at present.

Survival Strategies

In the past I have referred to the writings of Raghavendra Gadagkar. Vol. 37, No. 5, Page 71. His writings are of special interest because unlike many scientists who in their "insatiable thirst for detail" miss the main point. In his writings the main picture is always before us. Survival Strategies will fascinate the serious reader. He has attempted to show that Darwin's theory about the Survival of the Fittest is often misunderstood to mean that the life-styles of the members of different species results in the improvement of the group, evolutionarily speaking. This is not always so. The struggle for survival results in the maximum development and dominance of a particular individual. It is not inevitable that his genes will shape the future of successive generations. The dominant stag of a group of deer will attempt to corner all the females. But the sub-dominants continue to be around and mate with

the females when the King is in sight "quite unmindful of the good of the species". The author appears to be convinced that "Natural Selection almost always acts at the level of individual organisms and selects those that are best adapted to their environment even if that hurts the group of species as a whole".

The book starts with a description of the hunting methods of the tiger and the lion, the former attacking its prey individually, and the latter by a section of the pride. This reflects the life-style of the two species and is in accordance with the physical conditions of their habitat. Many of the smaller forms of life are either solitary or social. The mosquito for example lives alone (except while mating) while bees get disoriented unless they are in a group.

For birdwatchers several references about avians will be of interest. A problem which is always in the forefront of the birdwatcher is the relationship as well as the effect of the environment on the species. Siberian cranes fly 6400 kilometres from Siberia to Bharatpur to avoid a harsh and foodless winter in their breeding grounds, and arrive in the hospitable conditions of Rajasthan. The blackcap *Sylvia atricapilla* which breed in England and northern and central Europe used to migrate to the Mediterranean region in winter. But now with climate changes, and English winters becoming less severe "more and more blackcaps are being seen in England or in northern and central Europe". The book, distributed by Orient Longmans is worth acquiring. There is no unnecessary verbiage in the 179 pages of the text. Every line makes a point.



Jamaica is a small island country located about 150 kms south of Cuba in the Caribbean Sea. Except for a small area in the South, the entire 11,000 sq. kms. of the island is covered by hills, the highest point being 2290 meters. For such a small area, there is an enormous diversity of landscape and vegetation, ranging from coastal wetlands to savannah and rolling plains, and from dense wet to dry limestone forests over a large part of the country. Most Indians know of Jamaica only as one of the constituents of the West Indies cricket team. There is, of course, a lot more. Having spent 4 months in Jamaica recently, I would like to share my birding experiences with readers of the Newsletter.

Being an island, one feature stands out among Jamaican avifauna: the number of endemic birds is very high, about 27 at last count. This is roughly 10% of the total bird species recorded on the island. Even birds that you see fairly often are endemic and found nowhere else. Of course, this puts a great responsibility on the Jamaicans; if any of these endemic birds is endangered in Jamaica, it becomes extinct the world over. Another factor that will hit the Indian birdwatcher is the relatively low population densities of birds. Nowhere do you see birds in such large numbers that you do in India. Even in

New World Experiences

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an area like the Caymanas dykes, a marshy wetland very close to Kingston, the capital and largest city, numbers are small.

The best way to reach Jamaica from India is to first get to London and from there board the Air Jamaica non-stop flight to Kingston. Checking in at the Air Jamaica counter at London begins your Jamaican birding experience, the logo of the airline being a hummingbird. And not an ordinary hummingbird, but a spectacular looking one called the red-billed streamertail *Trochilus polytmus*. As the name implies, the bird's tail comprises of two 13-14 cms long streamers placed at the end of a body of about the same length. The thin bill is red while the body is an iridescent emerald green, darker at the back. The female lacks the streamers and has white under parts. Popularly known as the Doctor bird, the red-billed streamer is endemic to Jamaica and has been designated as the National Bird. A subspecies with a black bill is found in the eastern side of the island.

The Old World has nothing like hummingbirds. Superficially resembling our sunbirds in looks and habits, they are an entirely different genus with an astounding range of size, colour, shape, etc. Their flying ability and very high rates of metabolism leave the sunbirds far behind. The

hummingbirds are the only birds capable of flying backwards. Their wings beat at such a high rate that they hum like those of insects giving the birds their name. Of the 338 species of hummingbirds, all are found in the Western hemisphere with 3 inhabiting Jamaica. Along with the streamertail, the Vervain hummingbird *Mellisuga minima* is also endemic to Jamaica. The latter is extremely small and you can well mistake it for a bumble bee. The third species, the Jamaican mango *Anthracothonax mango* is a healthy 13 cms in length. I could not find out why it is called the mango, as mangoes are not natural in Jamaica, although they have been introduced and are quite abundant now.

Any Old World birder will recognise the pied-billed grebe *Podilymbus podiceps* as a grebe. Its black and white pied bill is diagnostic. Fairly easy to see, it is nowhere as numerous as our little grebe or dabchick *Podiceps ruficollis*. Another grebe found in Jamaica that looks very similar but which I did not see is the least grebe *Tachybaptus dominicus*.

A common sight on the sea front in Kingston, the capital of Jamaica, is the brown pelican *Pelecanus occidentalis*. It is a typical pelican except that it is the only pelican that dives for its fish diet. A good place to watch this bird is the Fisherman's Cafe at Port Royal near Kingston from where you can see the pelicans dive for their food while you are enjoying your own Jamaican cuisine! Among the pelicans on the sea front, you are bound to see a few frigatebirds. Only one species, the magnificent frigatebird *Fregata magnificans* is found in Jamaica. You can spot it regularly in Kingston and elsewhere in the company of not only pelicans but also royal terns *Sterna maxima* and laughing gulls *Larus atricilla*. Both the latter are also fairly common. The former with its yellow bill and forked tail looks very much like our river tern *S. aurantia*.

One bird that makes you feel totally at home is the familiar cattle egret *Bubulcus ibis*. It is the same bird that throngs the Old World and is now well established in the New World as well. Arriving in Jamaica about 50 years back, it found the area to its liking and today follows the same habits of following grazing cattle as it does in India. In fact, it displaced a local cuckoo, the smooth-billed ani *Crotophaga ani* that had earlier occupied this niche of following cattle. The latter is a dark bird, reminiscent of our koel *Eudynamis scolopacea*, only a little stockier and with a heavier bill. Unlike the koel, it is not as arboreal and the sexes are alike. The New World cuckoos are not nest parasites.

Another egret you will spot in Jamaica is the snowy egret *Egretta thula*. This bird resembles our little egret *E. garzetta* right down to its yellow feet and its habits. However, it is a different species. You will also see the little blue heron *E. caerulea* and the tricoloured heron *E. tricolor*. The night heron *Nycticorax nycticorax* of India is also found although I did not see it in the wild. You can spot it in the Hope Zoo in Kingston. I did see the yellow-crowned night heron *N. violaceus* though. The latter is very likely to be seen in the daytime.

Two species of ibis are found in Jamaica. The more common is the glossy ibis *Plegadis falcinellus*, the same species that is found in India. It can be seen quite readily in the winter in the flooded fields off the Kingston-Spanish Town highway just outside Kingston.

Ducks are not too common. Even in winter. I could see only one, the blue-winged teal *Anas discors* which is migratory. I was able to see it at the Caymanas dykes, which are an area of marshes within easy driving distance of Kingston. It is a good location to see all types of water birds. Among the latter is the only kingfisher found in Jamaica, the belted kingfisher *Ceryle alcyon*. Kingfishers are not too common in the New World, only 6 species being found in the region.

One of the most common birds seen in Jamaica is the Turkey vulture *Cathartes aura* or John crow. The latter name is a bit of a misnomer as the bird is a vulture and not a crow. In fact, an Indian birder will miss two very common Indian birds, the house sparrow *Passer domesticus* and the house crow *Corvus splendens*. Both do not exist in Jamaica. The John crow is a black bird with a red head and the silhouette of our scavenger vulture *Neophron percnopterus*. You see it all over the island from the urban areas of Kingston to lonely mountain roads. I did not see any other large bird of prey but did manage to see the resident American kestrel *Falco sparverius*, a much smaller bird than our kestrel *F. tinnunculus*, and the merlin *F. columbarius*, a winter visitor. The latter is the same species as found in India.

Another bird common to India is the common moorhen *Gallinula chloropus* quite common at the Caymanas dykes. The American coot *Fulica americana* looks like our coot *F. atra* but is a different species. The white frontal shield of the American coot is tinged with brownish red while our coot's shield is white. At first glance you will be sure you have seen the black-winged stilt *Himantopus himantopus*. But the species found in Jamaica is the common stilt *H. mexicanus*. The latter has a black crown that our bird does not have apart from other differences. Their habits are almost the same though. The northern jacana *Jacana spinora*, fairly easily seen at the Caymanas, looks like the bronze-winged jacana *Metopidius indicus* but has a chocolate brown colour and no white supercilium. It has yellow patches under the wing. In America it has been given the very apt name of Lily-Trotter.

Jamaica is well represented by the Columbidae, or the pigeons and doves. Interestingly, the most familiar member in India, the blue rock pigeon *Columba livia* is not found in Jamaica, except some escaped domesticated birds. However, other species make up for this deficiency. The bird seen the most is the common ground dove *Columbina passerina*. This is a small dove about 14 cms in length and found almost invariably on the ground. The Zenaida dove *Zenaida aurita* is also fairly common. Spots on its wings are diagnostic, as is its large size, about 28 cms. The white-winged dove *Z. asiatica* is recognised readily by the white edge to its wing, even when it is at rest. Of the nine other species of Columbidae found on the island, I spotted only one more, the white-crowned pigeon *Columba leucocephala*. Its colloquial name of Baldpate is very descriptive.

The large macaws and parrots found in south America are not found in Jamaica. However, two endemic species of parrots are found, the yellow-billed parrot *Amazona collaris* and the black-billed parrot *A. agilis*. You can see the former in Kingston where a small flock has established itself in Hope Zoo. There is some dispute as to whether this flock comprises only of escaped birds or if the escaped birds are now breeding

independently. In any case, you can now see this bird quite easily in urban Kingston.

Another bird familiar to the Indian birder is the barn owl *Tyto alba*. I was able to see one quartering a vacant plot of land outside my window in Kingston at 5.30 a.m. Another owl found in Jamaica is the endemic Jamaican owl *Pseudoscops grammicus* but I was able to see only a captive specimen in Hope Zoo.

The Jamaican Woodpecker *Melanerpes radiolatus* is another of the many endemic species in Jamaica. At first glance this bird looks like the Maratha woodpecker *Picoides maharattensis* we are familiar with but it lacks the spots on its back, having fine bars instead. The red on the head of the Jamaican species is also more extensive.

Tyrant flycatchers are a group of birds well represented in Jamaica. I could not see too many species but I did get to see the most common of the lot, i.e., the loggerhead kingbird *Tyrannus caudifasciatus*. It gives the effect of a large bulbul with a stout beak. The overall effect is that of a pied bird.

One of the most familiar birds in the Old World, the crow, is virtually absent in Jamaica. I came across a few specimens of the Jamaican crow *Corvus jamaicensis*, another endemic species, only once at the Botanical gardens en route to Ocho Rios, a tourist resort, from Kingston. Apart from the normal cawing, this crow produces a host of jabbering and gobbling sounds; hence its common name, the jabbering crow.

Only one thrush, the white-chinned thrush *Tardus aurantius*, is common. It is easily seen in gardens in Kingston. The mimic thrushes *Mimus polyglottos* being one of the more common birds in Kingston. Another mocking bird, the Bahamas mocking bird *M. gundlachii*, is found in the southern part of the island.

A very common group of birds, particularly in winter, is the wood warblers *Parulinae*. These birds are found only in the New World and are not related to the Old World warblers. They behave more like our leaf birds than warblers. Two species are resident in Jamaica while a host of others are visitors from

north America. I was able to see only some of these visitors, among them the northern parula *Parula americana*, a fairly common visitor, as is the palm warbler *Dendroica palmarum*. Most common are the black and white warbler *Mniotilta varia*, three white stripes on its head being diagnostic, and the Americal redstart *Setophaga ruticilla*. The latter does not look at all like our redstart *Phoenicurus ochrurus*. The male is black and maroon while the female is black and yellow. Common in gardens.

Even more common in gardens inside cities is the bananaquit *Coereba flaveola*. This tiny lively bird builds nests like our prinias by stitching leaves together. I found one of these nests in the garden of the house we were staying in. Two small birds you are likely to see on your lawn are the black-faced and the yellow-faced grassquits *Tiaris bicolor* & *T. olivacea*. Both are tiny birds with typical seed-eating bills. Their names describe them aptly. The latter, in particular, tends to wander into verandahs as well. Another common seedeater is the saffron finch *Sicalis flaveola*. This is an introduced bird from south America but now quite common. The effect of the male is a bright yellow while that of the female is like that of our house sparrow *Passer domesticus* with a saffron wash here and there.

A very common bird is the greater Antillean grackle *Quiscalus niger*. Its call gives it its common name, cling cling. It gives the effect of a myna that is totally black, but with a prominent white eye. This is a likeable bird, as it becomes as confiding as our myna. Of course, it is not a myna at all but an icterid, a family that includes birds like the Jamaican oriole *Icterus leucopteryx*. The latter is not an oriole at all but its predominantly yellow plumage and habits are strikingly oriole-like. I saw it fairly often in Kingston itself.

I hope you have liked the brief survey of Jamaican birds. I have covered only those birds that an Indian visitor is likely to find and see. The list is certainly not exhaustive. If you do get an opportunity to visit the island, I expect you will find this write-up useful. Till then, happy birding in India!



Editor's comments on name changes of Indian birds in NL : 38/2. Personally, those of us who watch birds for pleasure should continue using the names as they are in our standard reference books, namely the Handbook by SA and DR. We just cannot start using new names or get into controversies which are best left to the so called ornithologists. I do not quite agree that because there is a mountain quail in the US we should call ours the Himalayan quail. The point here would be that if we accept a change it should be as in the case of scientific names - which was named first. If ours was, then let the people of "God's Own Land" call theirs the rocky mountain quail.

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Comments on Newsletter - pelicans; checklists

Ketan Tatu's note on the blacknecked and crested grebes in Gujarat needs to be commented on. Several birdwatchers reported a congregation of the former grebe in Tata Chemicals extensive Charakla salt pans near Dwarka during 1996 autumn. The matter was referred to BNHS and I was asked to check on the reports which, with Lalsinhbhai Raol I did in early 1997. We saw three flocks totalling upto 200 birds. This year in midwinter I again visited the salt pans and saw upto 300! BNHS was sent a detailed report. It is possible that the blacknecked grebe is a fairly regular, and not an uncommon winter visitor to the salt pans bordering the Gulf of Kutch. Regular confirmation is welcome. The larger and very

distinctive crested grebe was reported breeding on the Kijadya Waterbird Sanctuary near Jamnagar, first by Taej Mundkur a decade ago, and since then it is a regular breeding/wintering species on many of Gujarat's wetlands.

Ketan's observation of black drongos feeding from the vendor's pan reminds me of a note I had sent to BNHS about black drongos taking "Ganthia" thrown up by the vendor in Rajkot. "Ganthia" of varied shapes are made of gram flour, deep fried. These were worm-shaped and people used to throw them up to half a dozen birds perched on the overhead electric wires. Incidentally, these birds collected at sundown prior to going off to roost in the neighbourhood trees. How these, otherwise purely insectivorous birds took to "capturing" food thrown up is a matter for conjecture. But roasted gram flour is used as staple for insectivorous or "soft-billed" birds by bird fanciers.

At my feeding station in Gandhinagar chapati crumbs are taken by tailor birds and ashy wren warblers, and here, in the Himalayas, the Himalayan whistling thrush feeds on boiled rice - no doubt attracted in the first instance to the grains resembling grubs.

I found an old copy of Vol. 32, No. 1 & 2 (January / February 1992) Newsletter with a photograph of a spotbilled pelican in flight on the cover and Sridhar's report on the species status. Might it not be worthwhile for birdwatchers in Karnataka, Andhra and Tamil Nadu taking this bird on their special agenda in the years ahead to provide regular reports on nesting sites? Something I intend to do for the sarus and the flamingos in Gujarat.

It was here, at about this time, that I received a letter for help from Mysore Amateur Naturalists (MAN) to come forward and adopt foundling pelicans at Kokkere Bellur. Well, I am a proud foster parent of one (I am told lusty) spotbill which should by now have taken to flight.

Between Sridhar's 1992 write up and my "Year of the Pelican" have there been any notes on this pelican? It would be good to have them culled and a separate file made. We should be well prepared to receive the birds coming winter, and be in a position to give strong public support. While we bemoan the absence of political will, we are at fault in that we have really done precious little to get people excited about birds, specially those as dramatic as the pelicans.

By publishing this note in the next NL, do set the ball rolling. Apart from the spotbilled pelicans of S. India, we can start similar publicity for the sarus, the large and lesser flamingos, the lesser florican and the adjutant storks of Assam. Perhaps also the great Indian bustards. Let us identify the villages, the forest personnel, the young amateurs who are working for these birds, and let them know that we value their efforts and have high regard for them. Here I might mention Manu of Mysore and his friends who are doing a singularly fine job for the Kokkere Bellur pelicans. Then there is young Hillajyothi Singha who guided by A. Rahmani, has been working on adjutant storks in Assam. My own friend Parasarya of Anand, Gujarat, has an enviable track record for inquiries into Sarus. Who are the others? We must get to know them,

must stand behind them. Concerned village communities and dedicated forest guards are the really endangered species and our concerns must go to them.

The checklist controversy

Making checklists has become a bane of birdwatching nowadays. It does make the enumerator feel he is undertaking a terribly scientific exercise. We have individuals making checklists of areas which have been birded over for a century! Such checklists are personal records and, agreed, of great importance to the person concerned, but by and large quite meaningless for most of the readers of the NL. Where indeed to draw the line? Who is it who decides what is worthwhile including and what is not?

A whiteheaded babbler excites me but to the Editor perhaps it is part of his daily exposure! Sparrows, crows, mynas, rose-ringed parakeets were commonplace over much of the sub-continent once. Are they so today? Where does one draw a line on a map where a bird is worth getting excited about and where not? For instance, the jungle crow is missing over large areas of the Saurashtra peninsula and even here in Gandhinagar, and yet it suddenly puts in an appearance all along the coast from Jamnagar, west to Okha and south to Porbandar! Referring to the NL, Vol. 38, No. 1 & 2, of January and February 1998, I would like to draw attention to the checklist on page 1. If this checklist had been missing, this article might have been incomplete. On the other hand, this is even by itself a valuable list which would have been of great intrinsic value without the rest of the write up. The list succeeds in focussing sharply on to the main purpose for which the Nelapattu-Vedurupattu Bird Refuges were established. The date 30th March is significant.

Now turning to page 7, we have another checklist which is interesting but really not worth the space it occupies. For instance, while the information about Jaldapara makes great reading, not so the bird list. We could have been told about the birds as the Editor has in "A Walk in Doddagubbi", page 16. I read through the article on Jaldapara several times to determine the time of the year these birds were seen. The concluding para : "The notable resident birds noticed were blacknecked and lesser adjutant storks, red-flanked bush-robin and the great sandpiper and the lesser sandpiper." Surely, the red-flanked bush robin is not a resident! and what are the resident great and lesser sandpipers? Nowhere is there the great thrill of being in a magnificent area, or the joy of watching birds from the back of an elephant! I have always wanted the NL to be not a scientific publication, and while we do expect articles to be factually accurate and informative, we want the sheer joy of being out in the field, watching birds at close quarters in one's garden to drip from every sentence. Here again, I must conclude with a "Hurrah" to Vinoj Phillip, A Rao and B. Shridhar, for likening the moon and the stars to "Smooth shining diamonds dotting a maiden's neck...." Next time I come south, I will look forward to these three gentlemen taking me to Nelapattu in "ANJ's Maruthi Gypsy". I would, however, insist on spending the night out under the stars, below the star studded sky and not in the "Three rooms with attached baths", and all the accompanying facilities.



Some comments on the Book of Indian Birds - Twelfth Revised and Enlarged Centenary Edition

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It was after a great deal of hesitation that I bought the Centenary Edition of "The Book of Indian Birds" by Salim Ali, revised by J.C. Daniel and illustrated by Carl D'Silva. This was because I had with me the 10th Edition I had purchased in 1978. Secondly, the cost at Rs. 395/= one has to think twice about purchasing a book which had, in 1978, cost me Rs. 45/= only.

But the new format, attractive illustrations and greater coverage of species and above all the favourable reviews it has been receiving proved too much of a temptation and I became the proud owner of a copy last December. I find that the book has been doing really well in the market and what I had bought was the second reprint dated May 1997 (just 15 months after it was released!)

I certainly will not disagree with my friend Andrew Robertson [whose review had appeared in the Newsletter (NLBW 36 (5) : 96- 97)] who considers its illustrations to be the "best ever painted to accompany a book on Indian Birds". Yet having used this book for the past few weeks, I could find several errors and shortcomings in the plates and a few in the text as well. Some of these may appear trivial but are critical if the illustrations are to prove helpful in the identification of birds in the field. I would like to point out some of them in the hope it will draw the attention of the users (and caution them while using this book) and the publishers (who could carry out suitable corrections in the subsequent editions/reprints).

Comments on the plates :

Plate No. 1 : Great crested grebe and little grebe are depicted in different plumages that are attributed to sexual dimorphism. However in both cases, sexes are alike and the differences in the plumage pertain to breeding and non-breeding conditions.

One of the important distinctions between the Indian shag and little cormorant is the shape of their beak - thin and long in the former and short and stout in the latter. The illustrations fail to bring out this aspect.

Plate No. 3 : While plumage variations have been depicted for most species, the two species of pond herons illustrated are shown in breeding plumage only. There is no indication of this in the plate and no mention of the non-breeding plumage in the legend to the plates.

Plate No. 6 : The lesser flamingos that I have seen have never been so colourful as the one illustrated.

Plate No. 17 : The rock bush-quail, according to the legend, lacks supercilium. But the illustration clearly shows a white supercilium in both sexes of this species.

Plate No. 23 : The yellow wattled lapwing does not have a white band across the wings but only a thin white wing-bar contrasting with black primaries and secondaries.

The leg of the Indian courser should have been whitish in colour.

Plate No. 24 : There is no indication that the godwits are depicted in winter plumage. This holds true for most other waders in the following plates as well.

Plate No. 26 : The eyestripe of the Kentish plover should have been narrow and the patch on the sides of the breast, darker.

Plate No. 29 : But for the silhouettes, none of the sandgrouses are illustrated in full. One has to refer to the text or the legends to get an idea of what the bird looks like, especially regarding patterns on the belly or tail shape which are crucial features in identifying the species in flight.

Plate No. 30 : The position of the 'chessboard' is incorrect in the little brown dove - it should be on either sides of the fore-neck and not on the hindneck. In the rufous turtle dove, the 'black and white' chessboard is completely missing. The habitat mentioned for emerald dove - dry deciduous - in the legend is somewhat misleading.

Plate No. 32 : The belly colour of the redwinged crested cuckoo is white and not as illustrated.

Plate No. 34 : The white facial disc mentioned in the legend is not seen in the illustration of the mottled wood owl.

Plate No. 36 : The nightjars appear so distinct in their plumage and I wish they were so easy to tell apart in the field too ! The jungle nightjar shows white on primaries which according to the legend is absent in this species.

Plate No. 38 : The wings of the broadbilled roller should have been longer and more pointed.

Plate No. 40 : It is strange that woodpeckers are depicted in horizontal stance, not typical for some of the species. There are no indications of the sex of the birds illustrated. In the case of the heartspotted woodpecker, the legend says "sexes dissimilar". But even in the text there are no details as to how the sexes are different. For the little scaly bellied green woodpecker, the legend gives the distribution, limit in the south to Karnataka (Bangalore) which is incorrect. The text gives the correct distribution.

Plate No. 41 : Please refer to Andrew Robertson's comments on the blackbacked woodpecker (NLBW 36 (5) : 96-97)

Plate No. 42 : The bush lark and redwinged bush lark look so different in the illustration but in fact are quite similar and distinguished with difficulty in the field (see text). Besides, the distribution of the bush lark, given in the legend, is incorrect.

Plate No. 43 : The beak shape of the rufous tailed finch lark is not at all finch-like in the illustration. Moreover, the colouration of the bird, especially upper parts, is misleading.

Plate No. 45 : The distinct looking southern subspecies (greybacked) of the rufous backed shrike which has no rufous on its back is neither illustrated nor mentioned in the text.

Plate No. 46 : The white rictal spot, usually present in the black drongo is not shown. The bronzed drongo is referred to as 'bronze' drongo both in the text as well as in the legend.

Plate No. 49 : The common wood shrike has much broader and conspicuous whitish supercilium than illustrated.

Plate No. 50 : The ruby throated race of the black headed yellow bulbul lacks the crest.

Plate No. 51 : The breast colouration of the white browed bulbul is whitish and not as illustrated. The eyebrow is prominent and the white colour extends to the forehead.

Plate No. 57 : The plain wren-warbler has no spots on the tail, according to the legend, but the illustration shows black and white spots on the tail.

Plate No. 59 : Female pied bushchat should look plain dark brown without the whitish wingbar.

Plate No. 60 : The chestnut colour in blueheaded rock thrush and the yellowish brown in orange headed and white throated ground thrushes are too deep. Besides, the white wing patch of the blue headed rock thrush is not at all shown.

Plate No. 62 : There is no indication of the plumage of the migrant wagtails as to whether they are in breeding or non-breeding condition. The yellow wagtail is shown in winter plumage whereas the grey, yellow headed and white wagtails are in summer plumage.

Comments on the text :

In general, the text is consistent in style and pattern with that of the earlier editions, retaining original accounts but, in addition, giving the alternate common English name and also local names in regional languages.

However, there is inconsistency in the usage of the revised scientific names. In the case of certain species such as the Dalmatian pelican and the darter only old names have been given while for some even the new scientific names have been provided eg. common grey hornbill and alpine swift.

The calls of the Franklin's nightjar has not been aptly described. It would have been more useful if there were pointers to specific field marks in the text as well as in the

illustrations to enable identification of birds in the field especially for those that are difficult such as warblers and waders. Actual sizes of birds are mentioned only for some in the text, though given in the legends.

General comments :

The map of India with important cities and rainfall pattern present in earlier editions has been replaced by a map showing bio-geo-graphical regions of the country. Perhaps a map showing important physical features and rivers and major cities would enhance the value of the book and serve as a ready reference in understanding distributions of birds.

The "changes in Territorial names" on page xvii is now obsolete and is no longer needed. In any case, I could not find in this section 'Burma' which is now 'Myanmar' and often referred to in the text.

As pointed out by Andrew Robertson, several important groups and families have been under-represented or omitted in this edition. Perhaps the next edition could include a few more of the tragopans and pheasants, laughing thrushes, babblers, warblers, thrushes, tits and finches along with distinct species such as the Srilanka frogmouth and the Nicobar megapode so that it will be more representative and useful as a guide to all regions of the country.

It would have been useful to mention similar species which are not described in this book but are likely to be confused with some of those described especially in the confusing groups such as waders, warblers, pipits etc.

Some of the information given in the text of this book is obsolete or incorrect - A few examples :

No. 33 - Black stork - The southernmost record is certainly not from Rollapadu. It has been recorded near Pondicherry (JBNHS 87 : 306-307) and recently even in Kerala.

No. 38 - Black ibis - This has been recorded even in southern Tamil Nadu (Ramnad and Tirunelveli districts - several reports in Newsletter for Birdwatchers, personal observations.

No. 44 - Barheaded goose - It has been recorded near Tirunelveli in Southern Tamil Nadu (JBNHS 84 : 204)

No. 98 - Cinereous vulture - Has been recorded in the Nellore district of southern Andhra Pradesh (JBNHS 87 : 306-307)

No. 408 - Yellow browed bulbul - Recorded in the Tirupathi Hills, Eastern Ghats, (JBNHS 88 : 287 - 288).

No. 483 - Desert wheatear - The distribution given for this species is confusing as it suggests the bird breeds from Himalayas down to Tamil Nadu (Madras)!



A blue throat and some other birds at Modur Village

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At the continued insistence of Mr. Mahesh Aradhya, a friend, I visited his village, Modur, which is 12 km south-west of Hunsur which itself is 44 km west of Mysore city and 833 mt above m.s.l. Modur, located in a dry deciduous forest habitat, is a quiet, agricultural village with a human population of about three thousand. It has only recently been brought under irrigation and is free from the undue influence of modern civilization. The major crops grown are Rice *Oryza sativa*, Ragi *Eleusine coracana*, Cotton *Gossypium sp.* and Tobacco *Nicotiana tabacum*. The village depends on four water bodies, namely Chikkakere, Doddakere, Hosakere and Mantikere, for both agricultural and domestic requirements.

Of these, Mantikere is the richest, with species of macrophytes belonging to *Eichhornia*, *Hydrilla*, *Nelumbo*, *Polygonum*, *Salvinia*, *Typha*, and some marshland grasses. The trees and shrubs commonly found in and around Modur are *Acacia nilotica*, *Acacia auriculiformis*, *Aegle marmelos*, *Anacardium occidentale*, *Azadirachta indica*, *Bambusa arundinacea*, *Bauhinia purpurea*, *Butea monosperma*, *Calotropis gigantea*, *Cascabela thevetia*, *Cassia fistula*, *Casuarina equisetifolia*, *Delonix regia*, *Erythrina variegata*, *Ficus benghalensis*, *Ficus religiosa*, *Mangifera indica*, *Moringa oleifera*, *Peltophorum pterocarpum*, *Phoenix sylvestris*, *Phyllanthus emblica*, *Porjania pinnata*, *Samanea saman*, *Syzygium cumini*, *Tamarindus indica*, *Tecoma stans*, *Thespesia populnea*, and species of *Agave*, *Caesalpinia*, *Eucalyptus*, *Lantana*, *Nerium*, *Plumeria* and *Ziziphus*.

Field work was done for two hours in the afternoons of 11 December 1996 and 3 February 1997 at Modur. On the latter date, as the birds were being listed, suddenly, in a shrubbery near an open field adjacent to the bare, unmetalled road, a sparrow-like brownish bird, hopping around with tail cocked and flying short distances, caught my eye. The conspicuous dark orange in its tail while in flight made me look again for the bird. It could then be identified easily as an adult male blue-throat (1644 - *Luscinia svecica*) by its blue throat with chestnut patches in the middle of it. A little behind the shrubbery of *Acacia*, *Agave* and *Lantana* was a small water channel, running for about a kilometre into the field. It was interesting to observe this lone male bird often going near the water to feed, sometimes being out of sight, or coming into the open on a bush, making harsh "chuck-chuck" calls. It continued its hunting activity and similar behaviour for all of the next half hour. My desire to see this uncommon winter visitor again on 20 February of that year was a futile exercise, as it was not to be found either at that earlier location nor anywhere along the water channel.

I also came across the following 62 bird species at Modur, either singly, in pairs or flocks, in the various habitats there : little grebe (5 - *Tachybaptus ruficollis*), little cormorant (28 - *Phalacrocorax niger*), oriental darter (29 - *Anhinga melanogaster*), grey heron (35 - *Ardea cinerea*), Indian pond heron (42 - *Areola grayii*), cattle egret (44 - *Bubulcus ibis*), median egret (47 - *Mesophoyx intermedia*), little egret (49 -

Egretta garzetta), asian openbill stork (61 - *Anastomus oscitans*), black-headed ibis (69 - *Threskiornis melanocephalus*), lesser whistling teal (88 - *Dendrocygna javanica*), sptobill (97 - *Anas poecilorhyncha*), pariah kite (132 - *Milvus migrans*), brahmny hawk (135 - *Haliastur indus*), white-breasted waterhen (343 - *Amaurornis phoenicurus*), dark moorhen (347 - *Gallinula chloropus*), purple moorhen (348 - *Porphyrio porphyrio*), black coot (350 - *Fulica atra*), bronze-winged jacana (359 - *Metopidius indicus*, redwattled lapwing (366 - *Vanellus indicus*), river sandpiper (401 - *Actitis hypoleucos*), blue rock pigeon (516 - *Columba livia*), spotted dove (537 - *Streptopelia chinensis*), rose-ringed parakeet (549 - *Psittacula krameri*), oriental koel (590 - *Eudynamis scolopacea*), large coucal (600 - *Centropus sinensis*), lesser pied kingfisher (719 - *Ceryle rudis*), small blue kingfisher (722 - *Alcedo atthis*), white-breasted kingfisher (735 - *Halcyon symnensis*), small green bee-eater (749 - *Merops orientalis*), Indian roller (755 - *Coracias benghalensis*), hoopoe (763 - *Upupa epops*), small green barbet (785 - *Megalaima viridis*), crimson breasted barbet (792 - *Megalaima haemacephala*), Indian grey shrike (933 - *Lanius excubitor*), rufous-backed shrike (946 - *Lanius schach*), black drongo (962 - *Dicrurus macrocereus*), Indian myna (1006 - *Acridotheres tristis*), jungle myna (1009 - *Acridotheres fuscus*), house crow (1048 - *Corvus splendens*), jungle crow (1055 - *Corvus leuillanti*), oriental iora (1097 - *Aegithina tiphia*), red whiskered bulbul (1118 - *Pycnonotus jocosus*), red vented bulbul (1126 - *Pycnonotus cafer*), long tailed streaked babbler (1253 - *Turdoides caudatus*), jungle babbler (1261 - *Turdoides striatus*), ashy wren-warbler (1515 - *Prinia socialis*), white-bellied tailor (1535 - *Orthotomus sutorius*), oriental magpie robin (1661 - *Copsychus saularis*), pied bush chat (1701 - *Saxicola caprata*), Indian robin (1717 - *Saxicoloides fulcata*), great grey tit (1790 - *Parus major*), yellow wagtail (1875 - *Motacilla flava*), grey wagtail (1884 - *Motacilla cinerea*), large pied wagtail (1891 - *Motacilla maderaspatensis*), thick billed flowerpecker (1892 - *Dicaeum agile*), purple sunbird (1916 - *Nectarinia asiatica*), house sparrow (1938 - *Passer domesticus*), baya weaver (1957 - *Ploceus philippinus*), white-throated munia (1966 - *Lonchura malabarica*), spotted munia (1974 - *Lonchura punctulata*), and black-headed munia (1978 - *Lonchura malacca*).

I am grateful to Dr. Kumar Ghorpade for reviewing and commenting on this manuscript and for checking the bird and plant nomenclature.

[The blue throat was noted at Mandya and at Kolar Gold Fields in his Mysore Survey by Salim Ali (see Ali & Whistler, 1942, J.B.N.H.S., 43 : 328, who commented - "Winter visitor : decidedly uncommon. Single birds were observed amongst irrigated standing sugar-cane and paddy crops in the former locality, and reeds bordering Betmangala tank in the latter." S. Subramanya, in the Bangalore Checklist (see George, 1994 : 55), considers it "Not too common winter visitor" and that "paddy fields are preferred habitats". - Dr Kumar Ghorpade].



The whistling teals in our domain

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The large whistling teal *Dendrocygna bicolor* and the lesser whistling teal or tree duck *Dendrocygna javanica* are more geese-like in appearance than the other species of ducks and teals and, like the geese, the male and female are similar in general appearance and colouration. Both species are identified by their long necks, the long legs which project beyond the tail when in flight, and the tawny-brown colour of their plumage. The large whistling teal attain a length of about 51 cm and the upper tail-coverts are white, as against the lesser whistling teal or tree duck which averages 42 cm in length and the upper tail coverts sport a chestnut hue. The size and colouration of the upper-tail coverts are the only two distinguishing features which separate the larger and the lesser whistling teals.

The larger whistling teals comprise of migratory and resident birds. The local flocks are spread out in Pakistan, North India south to the Deccan, east to Manipur and Bangladesh. The migrant birds are believed to have their breeding grounds in the Shan States of Myanmar, but I am not informed about the exact location(s). Over the years the larger whistling teals have become a rarity and are by no means a common sight in any of the above mentioned areas.

The species breed all through the rainy season and resort to the more extensive and weedy marshes, never resting on trees or anywhere else on land, and never being met with in village tanks or such other small places. Their nests are made by the more tender weeds being gathered into a small heap and the eggs laid on it. Their eggs are broad, oval and of a much whiter colour and larger than that of the lesser whistling teal. As the nest is always made on water, the young ones when hatched, have merely to step in to get into their favourite element - unlike the lesser whistling teals that have to carry their newborn chicks from the nest to some nearby watery patch.

Large whistling teals are normally slow flying birds that trade about in small companies of about two dozen birds. When feeding in some of those extensive jheels or marshes, or in lagoons or backwaters of large rivers, they may be observed in flocks numbering a couple hundred. They feed chiefly at night, during which time they huddle together and utter low muffled notes, and the clatter of their bills as they dabble for food may be heard from some distance. A favourite spot for their winter jamboree is a place called Bhuktiair Bhowanipore (25°. 22' N 87°. 30' E) located along the river Ganga, upriver from Manihari Ghat on the Eastern Railway in Bihar, where they congregate in their hundreds in the lagoons and backwaters for feeding during the night. The lesser whistling teals also haunt this particular stretch of river for their nightly feeding during the winter months.

The usual call of *Dendrocygna bicolor* is a peculiar kind of whistle, from which it derives its name, and which is not unlike "pew-ee, pew-ee". When in flight they are constantly calling out in this manner.

The lesser whistling teal or tree duck *Dendrocygna javanica* are purely resident birds in our domain, much more plentiful than their close relatives the larger whistling teals. They breed all through the rainy season - from June to September - and lay their eggs in all sorts of places, on trees, among old ruins, in unused chimney stacks, provided these be conveniently near some water; in marshes, among weeds, and also in grass fields. When nesting in trees, they will avail of any hole or hollow there may be. When building their nests in trees, the structure is generally crude, consisting of a few dry sticks laid over and across each other with a few feathers on them. When building in marshes, they select such places where the weeds are thickest, and gathering these in a heap, lay their eggs on it. They lay from 12 to 18 eggs, which are broad, oval and of a slightly pinkish white colour. Both parents sit on the eggs by turns, but the main duty devolves on the female. The drake keeping watch and giving the alarm, or driving away all intruders such as crows and hawks. The eggs are hatched in about three weeks, and if the nest be in a tree or among ruins, the brood are carried by the parents who hold them in their feet, to some nearby pool or stretch of water; their long claws enabling them to do so quite easily. The parent birds keep a very strict watch over their progeny, and are always careful to steer them where the weeds or reeds and rushes are thickest, hence the observer very rarely comes across them, though there very often may be dozens of such ducklings all about him. When hatched, the young ducklings are all similar in colour - a dingy white, striped in black.

I can well remember the day, almost 10 years ago, when angling in a quite pool in the compound of the Jewish Cemetery in Calcutta, when the surroundings were under water as the result of flooding during a good monsoon, having witnessed a pair of lesser whistling teal suddenly emerge from a nearby flooded thicket with 14 of their little ones. The young ducklings were swimming about under the care and guardianship of their parents, and seemed to be thoroughly enjoying themselves. My friend David Nahoum and I watched them very intently for a good 15 minutes or so, when all of a sudden the parent birds became restive and commenced rounding-up and briskly steering the whole family of chicks to the safety of the very thicket from which they had earlier appeared. I am convinced that the parent birds had felt our gaze like some physical impact and took warning from it, and so decided to make for the safety of the thicket. Although we were angling long after the family of lesser whistling teal sought refuge in that thicket, they did not leave the confines of their refuge, and so we never spotted them again.

Lesser whistling teals are gregarious by nature and are rarely seen either singly or in pairs, except during the breeding season. Flocks of about 30 to 40 birds are what one generally come across in some of those smaller jheels and marshes, but in some of those more extensive jheels or marshes they may be seen in numbers reaching thousands. In those lagoons or backwaters that evolve in the Ganga at Bhuktia Bhawanipore I have encountered the species in their thousands during the winter months, and that too in proximity to their larger brethren *Dendrocygna bicolor*.

The lesser whistling teals are mainly grass feeders and, apart from grain and seeds which form part of their diet, their main subsistence consists of small shells, earthworms, water

beetles, the spawn of frogs, small shrimps and crabs, and very often small fishes.

The usual call of *Dendrocygna javanica* is a prolonged whistle which sounds like *pue-e-e, pue-e-e*, which they constantly utter when on the wing. When in such vast numbers as they are to be found in some of those lagoons or backwaters of the river Ganga, this call of theirs - *pue-e-e, pue-e-e*, seems to drown all other minor sounds in the vicinity. When alarmed, they utter a whistling note of variable pitch which is not unlike "*pe-che-che- ne*". When surprised on a home site, particularly during the breeding season when with their young, they often remain taut and still in an effort to blend with the rushes and reeds, and the young ones remain submerged with only their beaks above the waterline.



White-cheeked bulbul *Pycnonotus leucogenys* nesting indoors

INTESAR SUHAIL, Kashana, Opp. Power House, Gulshanabad, Anantnag 192 101, Kashmir

On June 4, 1998, I paid a visit to my ancestral house at village Hassanpura about 50 kms south of Srinagar. The village, which falls in Anantnag district is situated on the banks of river Vishva and is approachable by a 3 km link-road that meets the Anantnag-Srinagar National Highway (NH1-A) at the famous township of Bijbehara.

The main entrance to the 40 year old, three storeyed house is a door (facing south), that leads to a corridor. When I stepped inside the corridor, I was stopped by some "begging calls". I looked above and to my surprise saw a white-cheeked bulbul *Pycnonotus leucogenys* feeding its crying chicks, which raised their tiny heads with mouths wide open, from a nest that hung over my head.

The white-cheeked bulbul is one of the commonest birds of Kashmir and is known to be tame and confiding. Salim Ali observed it to "fearlessly enter the house boats for scraps". During the snowy winter of 1995-96, I have seen a pair regularly roosting atop a wall-hanging frame inside my neighbour's bedroom! Though the habits of this bird are suggestive of its friendliness towards man, this is probably for the first time that it has been bold enough to share his home!

When the parent left to fetch another mouth-load for its hungry chicks, I had a closer look at the nest. It was a cup of dry rootlets and grass blades with a few strings of the material of which waterproof cement bags are made (I have observed such strings in two more nests of the species). The nest was hanging from insulated electric wires, that formed a jumble just above the door, I noticed that only the brim of the nest was attached to the wires and the cup was absolutely free hanging and support-less from the side and below.

This species is reported to construct a shallow, flimsy cup shaped nest in a crotch or horizontal fork of twigs in a bush or low tree (Ali, 1949), usually under 2 m. The nest that I observed was 2.15 m above ground (floor of the corridor), having an outside diameter (at the mouth) of 9 cm and outside height (of the cup) of 11 cm. It was so firmly attached to the wires that it could at the same time, sustain the weight of two fledglings and an adult. I have seen the same corridor harbour a swallows nest for the last few years. I was however told that last summer, the chicks of the swallow *Hirundo rustica* were preyed upon by house rats which dwell in the ceiling and this made the swallow shift to some other house this year. The hanging nest of the bulbul was perhaps un-approachable for the rats this time around.

On 6th June, I visited the place again and stayed there for the night. The fledglings had grown considerably since 4th June. None of the parents stayed at the nest in the night. The next morning (7th June) I could see one of the fledglings - the healthier and obviously the elder one - perched on the edge of the swinging nest, trying to grab the morsel before its weaker sibling could. Both the sexes fed the chicks and made alternate trips to the nest. While approaching, each parent first landed on the top edge of the door (which remained open all day) and then flew straight over to the nest. The pair did not seem to be bothered by the human movements through the corridor. It is important to note that the house has got twenty inmates, and besides this passage, there is only one more entrance cum exit to cater to the traffic.

Hassanpura and its adjoining villages constitute a flood prone area. For the last four years, this area has had annual floods that occur during July-September and destroy the

standing paddy crop. The paddy fields have extensive willow plantations *Salix spp.* at their periphery which provide nest for many bird species. During floods, the water level often rises well over 3m, submerging the trees and bushes. This could affect the breeding of the low nesting species like the white-cheeked bulbul. The residential area of the village (in which my ancestral house is situated), being at a higher elevation than the cultivated area, escapes the wrath of floods. This area however is devoid of vegetation.

Does the nesting of white-cheeked bulbul inside a house in a tree-less but elevated area indicate its adaptation to

overcome the natural calamity? It is difficult to come to a conclusion as I could not find more nests in the houses around. Further, the low lying cultivated area was still preferred by the majority of the species.

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CORRESPONDENCE

BIRD NAME CHANGES. RANJIT MANAKADAN, *Scientist - ENVIS Centre, Hornbill House, Dr. Salim Ali Chowk, Shaheed Bhagat Singh Road, Mumbai 400 023*

My view on the subject is that it would be nice if people all over the world called birds by the same name, especially since birdwatching is world-wide nowadays. We have however been using inappropriate names for many bird species. I had always found it odd as an ornithologist to call a species as buzzard, and another as white-eyed buzzard (both are buzzards aren't they?). And we have been calling birds by the wrong names. For example, the fantail flycatchers are no more grouped under the flycatcher group, so the tag of flycatcher has to go. By saying, we will stick to the old name because it is after all a common name (and scientific names are there to sort out such problems), is not a correct attitude I feel.

We have had half a dozen filled-up lists so far. The responses to this issue is encouraging. Some wrote that they felt happy that people of our region will now have a say in the common bird names of our area. I feel the strategy we should now adopt is to see that some of our ideas and suggestions are given respect and adopted, since it is inevitable that the new names will anyway get implemented in a few years. It would be nice if the birdwatchers from Bangalore could team up to discuss the issue and send me a list of the proposed names for consideration within a month or so.



PITTAS, POND HERON AND ROBIN. B.A. PALKHIWALLA, *785 A, Dadar Parsi Colony, Mumbai 400 014*

Going through Vol. 37, No. 4, the following items interested me out of all the lengthy articles by experts on birdwatching. You must understand that I am still a novice compared to the other writers, but the very sight of birds brings joy and happiness and at times old memories.

1) **Indian pittas** dying during migration - page 68. Some years back, I too had a similar experience. One of our gardeners had found a dead bird on the terrace of our building,

and knowing my love for birds, he told me to see it. It was an Indian pitta, no doubt. But thanks to Dr Anil Pimplapure, I learnt about their migration from south to north.

2) **Pond heron** The cover photo of this common bird and the short write up on the back cover, has increased my interest in this bird. While at Tarapore (Maharashtra), during my summer holidays every year, as I take rest after a long walk on the beach, just after sunset, I see these birds rising from the mangroves and fly back to their roosting places inside the old Portuguese Fort. During the day, they are not visible as they are hidden in the mangroves.

3) **Indian robin** (Page 67) Mr Aadish Davis observation of the robins nesting in the hollow beneath the seat of a moped is very interesting, and very strange. I see sparrows nesting in the switch boxes of street lamps, after entering from a small hole and I suggested to the B.E.S.T. to plug the holes. But they are not interested. Usually, the sparrows die due to short circuits.



THE *Melia azedarach* TREE A KEYSTONE SPECIES FOR FRUGIVOROUS BIRDS IN HIMACHAL PRADESH. Dr. S. THIRUMURTHI, *Professor (Forest Entomology), Forest College and Research Institute, TNAU, Mettupalayam, and C.P. BANUMATHI, Nilgiri Wildlife and Environment Association, Forest College, Mettupalayam 641 301*

Recently we have been in Himachal Pradesh in connection with a study tour. During our stay at Solan and Nauni (Dr. Y.S. Parmar University of Horticulture and Forestry), we have seen large number of *Melia azedarach* trees in fruit. It was late January and the day temperature varied between 2° C and 7° C with sub-zero night temperature. The altitude of Nauni campus of the University is around 1,600 MSL. The *Melia* fruits were fully ripe sporting golden yellow colour on leafless trees.

Around 6.00 AM the next day we saw noisy flocks of black bulbuls, *Hyppipetes madagascariensis* alighting on *Melia* trees. A total of seventy birds congregated on five trees just below the University Guest House at Nauni and went on feeding on *Melia* fruits. From then onwards till dusk around 6.00 PM the birds were arriving, and leaving after feeding on the fruits. Such *Melia*-black bulbul associations were observed

in and around Solan. Along with black bulbuls the other frugivores viz., redbilled blue magpie *Cissa erythrorhyncha*, yellowbilled blue magpie *Cissa flavirostris*, chestnutbellied nuthatch *Sitta castanea*, Himalayan great barbet *Megalaima virens*, roseringed parakeet *Psittacula krameri*, slatyheaded parakeet *P. himalayana* and blackbird *Turdus merula* were also noticed.

Melia azedarach produces edible fruits which ripen during winter in the lower reaches of Himachal Pradesh when no wild or cultivated fruits are available for frugivores. It is obvious that several fruit-eating birds depend on this tree during peak winter and hence *M. azedarach* could be classified as "Keystone" species. It is noteworthy that such conditions are not observed in Tamil Nadu. The *Melia* in Tamil Nadu except in rare cases belongs to the species *Melia composita* producing skinny fruits with hard endocarp unsuitable for frugivory. The bulbuls in the south redvented, redwhiskered, whitebrowed and even the scanty population of black bulbuls do not seem to be much interested in *M. composita*



DATA ON SARUS CRANE. B.C. CHOUDHURY, *Scientist, Wildlife Institute of India, P.B. 18, Chandrabani, Dehradun 248 001*

Several people in the recent past have expressed concern over the status of the sarus crane in India. Many surveys have been carried out within the known distribution of the species and the results point strongly to a decline in the population. In addition, land use in these areas has changed which has resulted in the modification of the habitat of the bird. This could be having a deleterious effect on the ecology and populations of the bird but conclusive results can be had only after long term studies.

The Wildlife Institute of India has initiated a project titled "Impact of land use pattern changes on habitat and ecology of the Indian sarus crane in the Indo-Gangetic floodplain". The project will assess the population of the species and will carry out several focussed studies on a long term basis to ascertain the ecology of the species.

We are compiling a data base of all sightings of the sarus crane since 1995. Anybody who has information regarding the same may please send the counts, date of recording, site characteristics and any other pertinent information to the above address. The information will be very much appreciated and acknowledged in reports and publications.

Looking forward to your contribution in the conservation of the sarus crane.



INDIAN PITTA *Pitta brachyura*, H. DANIEL WESLEY, 126, Ramalinga Nagar South, Tiruchirappalli 620 017

Accounts on the Indian pitta have been appearing in the NBLW. Here is what I have retrieved from my old notes written at Nagercoil of the birds seen on 31 December 1961 and 1,2 January 1962.

"One suddenly descended to the ground below the large mango tree in front of my room at Nagercoil and as soon as it touched the ground it remained still for a few seconds to scan the surrounding and to make sure that no one was watching it. If frightened by the approach of a passer by it flew to the branches above and stayed motionless, but observing keenly and closely the movements of the intruders.

On another day I noticed another bird (perhaps the same one) in the backyard where there is a favourable undergrowth of herbs at the roots of which the fallen leaves were rotting. It was hopping through the undergrowth, now stopping to pull out a leaf, now another to peck and eat the small grubs and other insects found underneath them. Though it was hopping about, it seldom made any noise; it never called, and moved very quietly.

As soon as it completed its search under a group of leaves, it hopped to another where it remained still for a few seconds wagging its short tail, which, since it is covered over by the wings can be seen only when wagged.

When approached by some one it stood still, craned its neck, straightened its legs and listened. I was surprised to find that the bird I was watching, though very shy at first and frightened at my approach, became within a few minutes 'tamed' and did not mind my presence within 5 feet. I followed it wherever it went and all the time it went on foraging, never caring nor bothering about my presence.

The colour of the body is very well suited for a life in the undergrowth. The abdomen and breast are earthy brown; the undertail is crimson red, the wings are greenish blue, the throat and chin are pale white. The head has, on either side, just above the eyes, a white streak, and another on the mid-dorsal side of it".



THE ASIAN WATERFOWL CENSUS 1994-1996, Dr. RAJIV SAXENA, MIG - 853, Darpan Colony, Thatipur, Gwalior 474 011, M.P. Writes to Taej Mundkur

I received a copy of "The Asian Waterfowl Census 1994-1996" the acknowledgement form of which is enclosed.

The report included 12 sites of Madhya Pradesh and 97 sites of Maharashtra in 1994, and none in 1995 and 1996. Does it suggest that no census was done in Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra in 1995 and 1996? Or, all the census data from these two states were too doubtful to be included in the report! Eleven other states or union territories have data missing for atleast one of these three years.

Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra are two of the largest states of India, and therefore, with no data from these states for last two years, this report cannot present a true picture of waterfowl in India. No explanation from Co-ordinators or writers are given in the report.



GREBES IN A CIRCLE. GEORGE VERGHESE, *Department of Entomology, University of Agricultural Sciences, GKVK, Bangalore 560 065*

I am a regular visitor to the Hebbal lake situated along the National Highway to Bellary. As I go daily to my University, I always keep a few minutes to see the bird life at the lake. My interest increased because of the flock of migratory ducks which had arrived at the lake during the first week of November. They consisted mainly of shovellers, spotbilled ducks along with resident species of little grebes, pond herons, cattle egrets, little egrets and purple moorhens which were found amongst the floating masses of water hyacinth *Eichhornia crassipes*.

On 30th January 1998, on my usual trip to the university at 0830 hrs, I was surprised to see a huge congregation of little grebes or dabchicks *Podiceps ruficollis*. What surprised me was that they had gathered within a circle of about 20 metre radius. There were 27 of them, some of them making short dives. Later, I focussed my attention on the other part of the lake along the eastern side. To my surprise, I could not even spot a single little grebe. Is it common for them to congregate in this fashion?



BAR HEADED GEESE ON FILM. PRAKASH GOLE, *1/B, Abhimanshree Society, Off. Pashan Road, Pune 411 008*

Recently some French film-makers wrote to me that they are hand-raising barheaded geese and will teach them to follow an ultra-light plane. They will then "act" in a film on migration which will be shot in Nepal Himalayas. Isn't it fantastic?



LESSER GOLDENBACKED WOODPECKER AND KOEL FEEDING ON COOKED RICE. AESHITA MUKHERJEE, *4/1, Staff Quarters, Kendriya Vidyalaya, E.M.E. - Savli Road, Vadodara 390 022*

From November 1996 to June 1997, every weekend we watched a lesser goldenbacked woodpecker *Dinopium benghalense* feeding on kitchen waste behind our house in Vadodara (22.00 N, 73.16 E), Gujarat. The waste is placed at this particular spot along with other garbage. The spot is adjacent to a road, and hardly 50 m from our window. Two females and a male koel *Eudynamys scolopacea* also regularly consumed cooked rice from this place.

Mynas, babblers, crows, blue rock pigeons, house sparrows, crow pheasants and redvented bulbuls were regular consumers of this kitchen waste and this behaviour is well established. But both the woodpecker, and koel, are arboreal creatures with zygodactyle feet. The recorded items in the diet of *D. benghalensis* are insects, nectar of plants and fruits (Ali and Ripley 1983, Abdulali 1968, Fox 1993, Ripley 1991, Balasubramanian 1992, Rajan 1992). So also *E. scolopacea* is known to feed on nectar, berries, insects, snails, eggs of small birds etc. (Ali and Ripley 1983, Krishnan 1952). But feeding on cooked rice by these species is an adaptation

which makes it easy for them to procure food which is abundant around human habitations and consumption of cooked rice is perhaps a new record for both these species.

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A NOTE ON THE SIGHTING OF WHITENECKED STORKS. SAMIRAN JHA, *Pranta Pally, P.O. & Dist. Malda, West Bengal 732 101*

On 16th February 1997, while approaching Ahiron (a famous Wetland in Murshidabad District, W. Bengal) I saw a beautiful sight - a large flock of whitenecked stork *Ciconia episcopus* along with a small flock of openbill storks *Anastomus oscitans*, and cattle egrets *Bubulcus ibis* in a ploughed field. They were just 100 to 150 feet away from the National Highway No. 34 and were 21 in number along with 16 openbill storks and 8 to 10 cattle egrets. Again this year (10.2.98) I and my friend Arunayan Sharma were watching birds in Baghar Bill in the same location. This wetland is much larger than Ahiron. As we were watching around 4000 coot along with 1000 + pintail and 1000 + red crested pochard, we suddenly saw a few birds take to wing some 200 metres away. We focused our binoculars and identified them as whitenecked storks. They were 6 in number. After returning home we referred to the Handbook and found that these birds are usually solitary, in pairs or in small parties, and Salim Ali had recorded the largest flock consisting of 15 birds. In Assam, Dr. Anwaruddin Choudhury found that 2 birds are the most common group size for this species (Choudhury 1995).

In Southern India, Kumaran Sathasivam (1996) recorded 15 to 16 whitenecked storks near Trichur. So my observation of 21 whitenecked storks is noteworthy. This species is completely locally migratory in central West Bengal Districts of Murshidabad, Malda, North and South Dinajpur. In my past 10 years bird watching I had not seen a single bird after April. I believe that these birds form small flocks of upto 25 birds during their local migration.

I would like to request other birdwatchers from Bengal to lookout for this species whenever they visit Ahiran and adjoining areas.

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A NOTE ON THE BREEDING DISTRIBUTION OF LESSER ADJUTANT *Leptoptilos javanicus*

While doing a survey on the birds of Malda District (W.B.) in 1994, I accidentally came across a small breeding colony of lesser adjutant stork *Leptoptilos javanicus* in Malda District. This site is located in a village named Kahala about 48 km from Malda town. Though adequate attention have been given to greater adjutant *Leptoptilos dubius*, the lesser adjutant have never received attention from birdwatchers and ornithologists. Data on their feeding and breeding biology is completely lacking. Their recent world population is estimated as only 1000 (Hussain & Ray, 1993), though Dr. A.R. Rahmani believes their number is much more than 1000. Any comment on their number can only be made after a detailed study of their distribution. According to the Handbook (Ali, S & Ripley, S.D. 1987) these birds breed in Ceylon, Kerala, parts of Malabar coast, Tamil Nadu, Bangladesh and Assam. More recently Subramanya (1996) in his detailed work on the Heronries of India stated that "the nesting of lesser adjutant at the Bhitarkanika Wildlife Sanctuary is the only recent record of the species nesting outside North-Eastern India (Pandey 1993)" (as quoted by Subramanya, 1996). The recent discovery of the breeding colony in Malda District indicates that the lesser adjutant still breeds outside Assam. The breeding site consists of three trees of *Ficus religiosa* and *F. benghalensis* located far away from one another. In 1994 I had counted 14 nests in two trees but in 1997 there was only five nests, that means about 65% decrease in their breeding success.

Egg collection, chick lifting and killing of adults is common in the village. As they breed in small scattered colonies all over its breeding range, it is very difficult to implement effective conservation measures, so there is a chance of the species becoming much rarer.

Acknowledgement

I am grateful to Dr. A.R. Rahmani for his comments.

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SIGHTING OF THE COMB DUCK IN KERALA. P.K. RAVINDRAN, Vallisseri, P.O. Avinissery, Thrissur 680 313, Kerala

On the afternoon of 17th January 1993, during a survey of the wetland birds, P.K. Uthaman, P.O. Nameer, C.P. Sethumadhavan and I were crossing a reedy marsh by boat in Ponnany Kolelands, when we sighted a few duck flying out of a dense patch of grass and reeds at Maranchery area, Malappuram District.

The main impression about these birds was, large size and black and white colour. The black wings, back and tail, and white underparts and black speckled white head and neck were striking. The pale coloured rump was also prominent. They were undoubtedly the comb duck *Sarkidiornis melanotos*. The identification is based on the field notes, which were later checked with Handbook of the birds of India and Pakistan.

In 1993 we were able to confirm our sight record once again. On 21 February I along with P.O. Nameer, P.S. Sivaprasad and C.P. Sethumadhavan observed three female birds sitting on a bund at the same place. Another day in December '93, C. Susanthkumar saw a pair of comb ducks sitting on the ground at Parampadam near Kunnankulam, Thrissur District, while they were preening. The fleshy black comb of the male bird was conspicuous at close range.

On 15th January 1995, we visited Maranchery again for the Asian Water Fowl Census. At this time our survey team saw sixteen comb ducks flying out from the thick covered marshy land. I have two subsequent sight records of this bird at the same place on 8th February '95 (4 numbers) and 1st January '96 (a single bird).

Once I heard the bird calling whilst flying. The note was a subdued 'Quack'.

In the Synopsis of the birds of India and Pakistan, S. Dillon Ripley gives the range of *Sarkidiornis melanotos* thus : 'Resident subject to local movements. In Pakistan, Sind, and India from the Nepal terai (JBNHS 65:326) South to Karnataka and east through Bangladesh to Burma'.

Salim Ali did not come across this bird in Kerala. We believe this to be the first instance of its being recorded in Kerala.

Reference :

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OCCURRENCE OF WHITE STORK IN DAKSHINA KANNADA DISTRICT. VENKATESHWARA H., Honthila, Ramakunja, Puttur 574 241 (D.K.)

On 1st February 1994 a flock of about 12 white storks landed in a cashew plantation in Halenerenki, a village near Ramakunja. The white stork is a big bird, and its black and white feathers and the long red beak and legs make it very attractive. Having no ecological concern some people attacked these beautiful birds just for fun or for their meat.

Seeing one of them being injured the other birds flew away, leaving one bleeding bird on the ground, the bird fluttered in pain and it drew the attention of some people, who out of pity picked this unfortunate bird and wiped the blood from its head and eyes. They rushed to the Govt. District

Veterinary Hospital located at Koila 5 Km. away. Without these good samaritans, the stork would have provided a good lunch for some scavengers.

There the bird was duly treated with antibiotics and ointment and kept under the care of their employee Karia. When we visited Karia again we were delighted to find the bird lovingly looked after by the hospitable and kind family of Karia. But on our second visit we found the bird missing and our enquiry revealed that some people from Mysore Zoo took custody of the bird.

Reference :

The Pictorial Guide to Birds of Indian Sub-continent.

BOOK REVIEW

"Building Bridges for Conservation" Review by, PRAKASH GOLE, Director, Ecological Society, 1/B, Abhimanshree Society, Pune 411 008

In 'Building Bridges for Conservation' Ashish Kothari and his team have brought together a lot of information which is both very interesting and educative. They deal with the vexatious problem of peoples' rights in our sanctuaries and national parks. In this context the cases of Kailadevi and Dalma sanctuaries and that of Rajaji National Park have been described in detail. The first chapter provides an overview of the problem. There is also a discussion of new directions in relevant legislation and the last one describes some examples from other countries where the same problem exists and was resolved in various ways. There is an exhaustive bibliography and annexures. The book appears to be an effort to build bridges between the people and government departments and agencies.

The treatment is descriptive. The case studies describe the location, geography, flora and fauna, the composition of people, their occupations and dependence on forests, their administrative and legal position vis-a-vis government agencies their impact on flora and fauna, efforts to ameliorate threats to sanctuaries including peoples' participation and joint forest management.

The discussion is anthropocentric with peoples' rights as the focal point. The treatment of peoples' impact on forests is sketchy and non-human beings in the sanctuary are not treated as stakeholders. However, the documentation very well brings out the fact that the concerned governments have never taken these peoples' problems seriously and their attempts to solve them are half-hearted and lack adequate resources. The Forest Department should really represent the side of Nature and its interests but lack the data and the will to build up a strong enough case. The authors admit the inadequacy of biological inputs in their study and I felt that this team should bring out a companion volume which examines in depth the impact of man and cattle on these forests.

The book seems to imply that even in protected areas the needs of the people should have priority over those of the wildlife. Here people include cattle whose numbers are actually higher than those of human beings. Neither the number of people nor the number of their wants is static. If these forests are to be managed by peoples' representative committees, they will, let us hope, be managed sustainably but mainly for the satisfaction of their own needs. The forests so managed in course of time will become plantations for human use with whatever limited flora and fauna they may harbour. Most probably large animals will be eliminated.

My own experience in looking rather critically at forests of Western Ghats in Maharashtra, seems to bring out the fact that the impact of man and cattle is far more insidious than usually thought of. Cattle are selective feeders and remove certain species of grass, sedge and herb. This probably results in selective removal of certain insects and hence certain birds. Insects and birds are pollinators of plants. Selective removal of the former selectively affects plants. Removal by people of dead wood and trees and shrubs useful to them affects again certain birds and insects and also alters the sex ratio of certain plants as found out by Rene Borges in her study of Bhimashankar forests. The total result is a great reduction in the diversity of flora and fauna. Thus woodpeckers have totally disappeared from Western Ghats forests in Maharashtra. If peoples' needs have priority over those of the Wildlife in our forests, the loss of biodiversity will be substantial.

The team probably realizes this and propose a category of Strict Nature Reserve in their expanded system of conservation area categories for India. In this context the concept of biosphere reserve with its zones of multiple and restricted uses seems to be apt. If we have to sustain and enhance our natural heritage, the area of the Strict Nature Reserve category will have to be substantially larger than at present. The book ably presents the case of people on whom the present network of sanctuaries and national parks has been imposed from above and argues strongly for their proper rehabilitation. I am however, looking forward to the companion volume in which the team, let us hope will also forcefully argue the case of our non-human brethren.

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Cover : Small green barbet (*Megalaima viridis*). A common arboreal green bird of the plains, it frequents wooded areas, gardens and grooves. It signals its arrival with a resounding *kotur... kotur... kotur* call. It is particularly fond of the berries of peepul and banyan tree and cherries of the Singapore cherry tree and supplements its diet with an occasional insect. Barbets are primary hole nesters and they excavate their nests in dried tree branches. Removal of such branches in urban areas is affecting the population of barbets.

Photo by S. Sridhar, ARPS